

Culture, Learning, and Poverty Shirin Vossoughi and Ray McDermott

Education 232
Winter 2014

Thursday 5-7:50
Cubberly 210

Poverty,
whatever can justify the designation of “the poor”,
ought to be a transitional state
to which no man ought to admit himself to belong,
tho’ he may find himself *in* it
because he is passing *thro’* it,
in the effort to leave it.

Poor men we must always have,
til the redemption is fulfilled, but *The Poor*,
as consisting of the same Individuals!
O this is a sore accusation against society.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1834)

Course Overview

This course looks closely at the history of categories, assumptions and ideas used to analyze (sometimes justify, sometimes struggle against) educational inequality in the United States from the 1950’s to the present. Our goal is to think carefully about 1) the historical, political and educational consequences of various approaches to analyzing poverty, race, schooling/education and inequality, and 2) critical interventions that emerged from a range of disciplines and the resources they provide for growing a more imaginative, complex and democratic vocabulary. This means we will have to run as fast as possible away from a common sense version of what most courses on Inequality in America might be. The usual fare is to document differentials in access by intelligence, subject matter, class, race, gender, educational status and various other predictors. After a century of such efforts, we have even more inequality to document. Something new and different is necessary.

The course moves historically, tracing the development of analyses, assumptions and propositions over time. The early 1960s saw an unprecedented mix of social science and educational policy in the U.S. If the 1950s issued mandates for civil rights for all citizens and equal education for all children, then the 1960s had to administer the political mandates into documented realities. It was a fertile time for scientific explanations of the success and failure of minorities and the policies employed, or at least invoked, in their name. In a series of books starting in 1959, anthropologist Oscar Lewis used the term “culture of poverty” not just to describe, but to explain the behavior of poor people he worked with in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and New York. For Lewis, the culture of poverty described not just the problems the poor had to deal with, but the problems they caused. By Lewis’s theory of culture, persons raised in poverty acquire attitudes and skills well tuned to the life they share with those immediately around them; continued use of such attitudes and skills makes people permanent members of the culture of poverty. Responsibility for the reproduction of their situation rests more with the poor than with the more affluent classes.

Arguments about the consequences of growing up in “a culture of poverty” dominated educational and family policy across the 1960s. Along with Lewis, political scientist Edward Banfield, psychologist Martin Deutsch and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan proposed that broken environments produce broken people and that, once socialized to the demands of a hand-to-mouth life, poor children enter school with inadequate cognitive skills, diminished language competencies, an inability to plan, and no desire to better their lives. Charges of “blaming the victim” followed quickly, and an empirical critical tradition raised questions about the ecological and social validity of data and methods used in culture of poverty theorizing.

From 1965-1975, powerful critiques of culture of poverty theorizing emerged in anthropology (C. Valentine), linguistics (W. Labov, R. Shuy), and psychology (M. Cole), and the very idea seemed to disappear until a recent resurgence, particularly in sociology (M. Lamont, W.J. Wilson). A core section of the course is

dedicated to this critical tradition. Our framework is interdisciplinary and gathers as data both the empirical findings directed against the culture of poverty and the nuanced conceptual work that brought critiques from different disciplines to an analytic language stressing the ongoing interaction of people and their multi-layered environments for opportunity. We expand the usual range of contributors by including analyses of fiction (and the prose of some fiction writers), particularly the early writings of Toni Morrison.

Together, these thinkers successfully showed how inarticulateness is rarely a linguistic problem, stupidity rarely a psychological problem, and misbehavior rarely a moral order problem. In their frame, the problem of the poor is not that they do not have enough culture, but that they have a difficult place inside a culture that has them looking wanting and unable. The major dividing issue therefore concerns just how much poverty must be understood as not only a debilitating environment, *but one in which all members of a society play a part*. Our goal in this course is to articulate a more inclusive theory of culture by which all participants—Hamlet’s “fat king and lean beggar . . . two dishes, but to one table”—must be accounted for in the unbalanced distribution of educational degrees, wealth, and status.

By bringing early achievements forward, we hope to save the present generation from having to do it all again. We will also re-envision, like Dewey, Vygotsky, and Lewin before us, an educational system that treats learning, not as an individual possession, but as a nuanced barometer of the multi-layered relations between persons and their shared circumstances. If someone seems unable to learn, ask not what is wrong with them, but what is wrong with the circumstances we have arranged for them.

The course texts also invite us to examine the “common sense” categories and dichotomies used to talk about educational inequality. Through our shared reading, writing, and discussion, we aim to transform these terms from a collection of fixed, self-evident categories—all versions of we vs. they—into a set of social relations ripe for analysis:

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|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| culture | poverty | intelligence | cognition | learning |
| difference | deficit | deprivation | race | assimilation |
| abstract vs. concrete | | success vs. failure | middle vs. lower class | |
| | equality/inequality | | civilized vs. primitive | |

Responsibilities

1. This is a text based course. We will try to do fun things with the texts, but nothing will make sense if you do not delve deeply into them. **Read, read, and read.** You will not have to read everything we assign and recommend, but you should make informed decisions about your choices.
 2. You are going to prepare a paper, starting day one. It is going to be a cumulative account of your struggles with the ideas. **Write and write** a little bit each week. Your analyses from the early weeks just might show up as data a few weeks later.
 3. The final assignment is to apply the readings from Weeks 5, 7, 8, and 9 to a critique of and appreciation for the new writing on the culture of poverty from Week 6. We will work on this task collectively and progressively (as in over time) and it should be easy to turn our first nine weeks of writing into a final project.
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Readings

Inexpensive used copies of Lewis, *Five Families*, Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (make sure you get the Plume edition), and Valentine, *Culture and Poverty*, are available from Amazon or Abebooks. Periodical literature is available through the Stanford Library. We will get you the rest on Coursework.

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 We didn’t do this neighborhood to ourselves.
 John Edgar Wideman (*Fanon*, 2008)

Schedule of classes and readings

Week 1: The New Culture of Poverty: The Popular Response and Some Complaints

Read the first two from the *Times* and write a 2-page summary and critique. By critique, we mean that you isolate analytic terms and figure out what work they are doing besides saying what they literally say. Words are like teenagers: they hang out together. Sort out the semantic lay of the land, and then read the other three.

Paul Tough

2004 *New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/20/magazine/the-harlem-project.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

Patricia Cohen

2010 *New York Times*
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/18/us/18poverty.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

Stephen Steinberg

2011 Poor reason: Culture still doesn't explain poverty. *Boston Review* (January 13)
<http://www.bostonreview.net/BR36.1/steinberg.php>

Mike Rose

2013 *Christian Science Monitor*. <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2013/0123/Character-education-is-not-enough-to-help-poor-kids>

Week 2: Brown v. Board and the Rise of an Anthropology of Education

Brown v. Board

1954 *The Supreme Court Decision on Segregation*.

Alice O'Connor

2001 *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton (chapter 4).

Jules Henry

1963 *Culture and against Man*. Vintage. [Chapter 8, Golden Rule Days, pp. 283-321: on the poverty of culture]

Luis Moll

2008 Mobilizing culture, language, and educational practices: Fulfilling the promises of *Mendez* and *Brown*. *Educational Researcher* 39 (6): 451-460.

Week 3: The Old Culture of Poverty

Oscar Lewis

1959 *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. Basic. (chapters)

1966 Introduction. In *La Vida*. Pp. xi-iv. Vintage.

1967 Debates on: *The Children of Sánchez, Pedro Martínez, and La Vida*. *Current Anthropology* 8: 480-500.

Martin Deutsch

1963 The disadvantaged child and the learning process. In A. Harry Passow (ed.), *Education in Disadvantaged Areas*. Pp. 163-179. Teachers College Press.

Consider also:

Edward Banfield. 1958. *Moral Basis of a Backwards Society*. Free Press.

... and for a critique of Banfield:

Sydel Silverman. 1968. Agricultural organization, Social structure, and values in Italy: Amoral familism reconsidered. *American Anthropologist* 70:1-20.

William Muraskin. 1974. The moral basis of a backward sociologist. *American Journal of Sociology* 79: 1484-96.

... and for a pre-history of the culture of poverty in the experience of colonization, modernization, immigration:

Lewis Terman. 1907. *Seven Bright and Seven Stupid Boys*;

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. 1910. *How Natives Think*;

W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. 1918-1922. *The Polish Peasant Europe and America*;
E. Franklin Frazier. 1939. *The Negro Family in the United States*;
Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey. 1951. *The Mark of Oppression: Exploration in the
Personality of the American Negro*.

Week 4: The Old Culture of Poverty: Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National
Action*

Lee Rainwater and William Yancy (eds.)

1967 *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. MIT. (The Report, pp. 1-48; and responses
by King, Farmer, Young, Rustin, Silberman, Jencks, Gans, Ryan, pp. 402-466). The report -- not the
responses -- is available on the internet: <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=primary/moynihan-report-1965>.

Alice O'Connor

2001 *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in the Twentieth
Century*. Princeton (chapter 8).

Week 5:

Toni Morrison

1969/1992 *The Bluest Eye*. Plume.

1989 Unspeakable things unspoken: The African American presence in literature. *Michigan Quarterly
Review* 28: 1-34.

Ray McDermott

1997 Achieving school failure, 1972-1997. In George Spindler (ed.), *Education and Cultural Process*.
Pp. 110-135. Waveland.

Recommended: Ralph Ellison. 1967. Letters - No Apologies. *Harper's Magazine* 235:4-20.

Week 6: New Studies of Culture and Poverty

Michèle Lamont and Mario Luis Small

2008 How culture matters for the understanding of poverty: Enriching our understanding. In
David Harris and Ann Lin (eds.), *The Color of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Exist*.
New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 2010, vol. 629.

Mario Luis Small, David J. Harding and Michèle Lamont, Reconsidering culture and poverty, 6-27;
William Julius Wilson, Why both social structure and culture matter in a holistic analysis of inner-
city poverty, 200-219.

Recommended: Joshua Guetzkow. 2010. Beyond deservingness: Congressional discourse on poverty,
1964-1996. *Annals (AAPSS)*, 649: 173-197.

Week 7: Evidence, Politics, and Levels of Analysis

William Labov

1969 The logic of non-standard English. In J. Alatis (ed.), *Georgetown Monograph on Languages and
Linguistics* 22. Pp. 1-44. Georgetown University Press.

Michael Cole and Jerome Bruner

1971 Cultural differences and inferences on psychological processes. *American Psychologist*
26(10): 867-876.

Michael Cole and Peg Griffin

1983 A socio-historical approach to re-mediation. *Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative
Human Cognition* 5(4): 69-74.

Michael Cole

2010 Education as an intergenerational process of human learning, teaching, and development.
American Psychologist 65(5): 796-807.

2013. Difference and deficit in psychological research in historical perspective. *Developmental Psychology* 49: 84-91.

Recommended on deprivationist theories of language: Courtney Cazden, Vera John and Dell Hymes (eds). 1972. *Functions of Language in the Classroom*. TC Press. See especially: Hymes, Introduction, pp. xi-iv; Robert Dumont, Learning English and how to be silent, pp. 344-369; Susan Phillips, Participant structures and communicative competence, pp. 370-393.

. . . and for more Cole: 1996. *Cultural Psychology* (Harvard); and Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole. 1981. *Psychology of Literacy* (Harvard).

Week 8: The Gut Response Informed by Other Cultures

Charles Valentine

1968 *Culture and Poverty*. Chicago (selected chapters).

1969 Debate on: Culture and poverty: Critique and counter-proposals. *Current Anthropology* 10: 181-201.

Carol Stack. 1975. *All Our Kin*. Harper (chapters).

Week 9: A Lone Voice

Eleanor Leacock

1967 Distortions of working-class reality in American social science. *Science and Society* 31:1-21.

1977 Race and the we-they dichotomy in culture and classroom. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 8: 152-159.

1980 Politics, theory, and racism in the study of Black children. In S. Diamond (ed.), *Theory and Practice*. Pp. 153-178. Mouton.

Recommended: Leacock. 1972. Abstract vs. concrete: A false dichotomy. In Courtney Cazden, Vera John, & Dell Hymes (eds.), *Functions of Language in the Classroom*. Pp. 111-34. Teachers College Press.

Week 10: Student Papers

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It is such a Bore / Being always Poor.

Langston Hughes